DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 043 SP 035 329

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TITLE Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams: An Avenue to Greater Teacher Empowerment.
PUB DATE [94]
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Collegiality; Comparative Analysis; *Departments; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; Middle Schools; Participative Decision Making; Professional Development; *School Organization; Secondary School Teachers; Self Efficacy; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Effectiveness; *Team Teaching; Work Environment
IDENTIFIERS *Collaborative Teaching; Reform Efforts; *Teacher Empowerment

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between teachers' perceived levels of empowerment in middle level education interdisciplinary teams and departmentally organized programs. Further, it attempted to determine whether significant differences existed in teachers' perceptions of each of six identified subscales of empowerment (decision-making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy, and impact) in each program type. The sample included 309 teachers from 16 middle and junior high schools with 154 members of departmentally organized programs and 155 teachers from interdisciplinary teams participating. The results showed that teachers in interdisciplinary teams perceived themselves to be significantly more empowered than departmentally organized teachers on each of the six dimensions of empowerment. In essence, when teachers work in organizations where norms for collegiality exist and a collaborative work environment is facilitated through the interdisciplinary team approach, teachers experience greater decision-making ability, self-efficacy, and confidence. Similar findings from self-directed teams in business and industry further support these results. (Author)

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ED 372 043



# Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams: An Avenue to Greater Teacher Empowerment

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Running head: MIDDLE SCHOOLS AND EMPOWERMENT

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## Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between teachers' perceived levels of empowerment in middle level education interdisciplinary teams and departmentally organized programs. Further, it attempted to determine whether significant differences existed in teachers' perceptions of each of the six subscales of empowerment [i.e., decision-making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy and impact] as identified by Short and Rinehart (1992) in each program type. The study included 309 teachers from 16 middle and junior high schools with 154 members of departmentally organized programs and 155 teachers from interdisciplinary teams participating. The results showed that teachers in interdisciplinary teams perceived themselves to be significantly more empowered than departmentally organized teachers on each of the six subscales of empowerment. In essence, when teachers work in organizations where norms for collegiality exist and a collaborative work environment is facilitated through the interdisciplinary team approach, teachers experience greater decision-making ability, self-efficacy and confidence. Similar findings from self-directed teams in business and industry further support these results.

# Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams:
# An Avenue to Greater Teacher Empowerment

Teaching, when carried out in isolation in bureaucratically organized institutions, shortchanges professionals because it denies teachers the ability to use the full range of skills and knowledge which they possess. However, the concept of empowerment appears to address this issue. Empowerment is a viable concept when viewed as the opportunities a person has for autonomy, responsibility, choice and authority (Lightfoot, 1986). Defining empowerment as the opportunity to act on one's ideas and to influence one's professional performance, teacher empowerment occurs when the classroom professional takes responsibility for and is involved in the decision-making process (Melenyzer, 1990). The concept of empowerment in contemporary school reform is one that offers promise in increasing teacher effectiveness while making the profession more satisfying and fulfilling. Reflecting on these issues, we began to speculate on the characteristics of educational program organization

which might best empower teachers to use their present range of abilities and be challenged to expand their skills and knowledge. Thus, we began to look at Middle Schools.

## What is it we know?

It is recognized that the bureaucratically organized school environment denies teachers autonomy and control in the workplace (Prawat, 1991). This lack of autonomy and control is problematic because it affects productivity and commitment. Further, it has been found that teachers' work has become increasingly complex, placing greater burdens on the practitioner (Cohen, 1988). These increased burdens arise from growing demands for teachers to teach higher order thinking and problem-solving skills, which have the net effect of multiplying pedagogical responsibilities. Moreover, increased concentration is necessary to adopt and effectively carry-out larger pedagogical responsibilities (Cohen, 1988). Without increased teacher autonomy and decision-making ability, schools will be faced with the situation of simplifying or deskilling the tasks teachers are to perform. However, where teachers receive sufficient information and hold collective responsibility to make

decisions, it has been found that teachers will work "harder and smarter" on behalf of students and parents (Glickman, 1989).

One of the more recent types of organization for work which is increasingly being employed in business and industry, the self-directed or managed work team, provides clues to factors which empower workers. The values and attitudes of today's workers have changed: they "demand greater participation, flexibility and autonomy; they also believe they should be afforded opportunities to work with their heads as well as their hands" (Wellins, 1992, p. 24). Further, self-directed work teams, which often are responsible for performing an entire job from start to finish while planning and managing their own resources, create an empowered work culture which allows workers to accomplish tasks formerly performed by supervisors (Wellins, 1992).

We speculated that worker empowerment, specifically designed into self-directed work teams in business or industry, was inherent in interdisciplinary teams commonly employed in middle level education. We knew that interdisciplinary team membership was helpful in the "development of the whole student" through emphasis on a "strong team identity" (George & Oldaker, 1985, p. 23). Also, the interdisciplinary team

organization impacts the school climate and is responsible for higher student involvement in clubs, athletics and other activities which are designed to encourage the full inclusion of the student body.

Interdisciplinary team organization, we learned, created a much different teaching environment from that experienced by departmentally organized teachers. For example, in middle schools employing interdisciplinary teams, George & Oldaker (1985) found faculty morale to be high. Moreover, isolated classroom teachers who became members of teams developed a sense of belonging and camaraderie they hoped to instill in their students. Doda, George & McKewin (1987) have pointed out that the interdisciplinary team organization is an essential component used to "eradicate teacher isolation and foster interdependence" (p. 26). Further, the extensive planning which facilitates reorganization to the middle school concept, with its unique components (i.e., interdisciplinary teaching, teacher-student advisories, self-scheduling within a block of time, etc.), provides additional opportunities for teachers as well as administrators to guide staff development programs aimed at improving instruction and developing classroom management skills (George & Oldaker, 1985). With the downshifting of decision-making within the

interdisciplinary team concept and the implied obligation for teamed schools to use more of the expertise teachers can provide, teachers assume a collegially-based status. For instance, teachers become more empowered to become experts in the field of middle level education and have ample opportunity to display their expertise as in-house trainers and staff development specialists within the field.

## What did we set out to learn?

Researchers have suggested that schools need a process where empowered teachers, closest to the point of implementation, design plans and strategies to bring schools as organizations closer to their vision of success for their students (Scarr, 1992). Thus, the ability of interdisciplinary teams in middle level education to empower teachers must be more clearly understood.

We undertook a study to investigate the relationship of organizational work design in schools and the empowerment of teachers. Specifically, this study investigated differences in the perceived empowerment of middle level teachers who teach in two distinct types of program

organization: the departmentally organized approach and the interdisciplinary team approach.

Research by Short and Rinehart (1992) has supported the existence of six underlying dimensions of teacher empowerment: decision-making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy and impact. Furthermore, previous research conducted on interdisciplinary teams in middle schools had indicated that teams increase professional discussion, boost teacher involvement in decision-making, increase teacher influence over decisions affecting teaching, and make teaching, in general, more rewarding (Erb, 1987). Despite the fairly substantial body of research on interdisciplinary teams, no studies had examined whether teachers in interdisciplinary teams felt greater empowerment than teachers who taught in departmentalized self-contained classrooms.

## How did we go about exploring it?

To compare the level of empowerment perceived by teachers in interdisciplinary teams with those in departmentally organized middle level education programs, we designed the following question:

Is there a difference in teachers' perceptions of their level of empowerment in terms of each of its six dimensions between interdisciplinary teamed and departmentally organized educational programs?

The six dimensions of empowerment identified by Short and Rinehart (1992) were compared between teachers working in interdisciplinary teams and departmentally organized programs. Three hundred teachers in 16 middle, junior and junior-senior high schools in 15 suburban and rural school districts in a northeastern state took part in the study.

What did we find?

The research revealed that interdisciplinary team teachers were significantly more empowered in all six factors [decision-making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy and impact] than departmentally organized teachers.

What might be some of the reasons each of these dimensions were significant among teachers in interdisciplinary teams?

- Professional Growth - This is the ability to function in a professional environment, to determine students are the first priority, to have an

opportunity for continuous learning, and to share decisions and collaborate with colleagues.

- Teachers were commonly involved in careful planning and staff development activities prior to the organization of an interdisciplinary team approach.
- Teachers received necessary training in such areas as team building and maintenance, group problem-solving, and interpersonal and intrapersonal skills as part of the transition to and maintenance of a teamed approach.
- Teachers were provided with common planning and class time during which reflective teaching practices such as clinical supervision might be carried out.

• Self-Efficacy - This is the ability to help students learn, to help empower them, to build programs for them, to focus on students, to create classroom-based teacher development, and to see that one's efforts make a difference for students.

- Teachers reported a renewed confidence and satisfaction with their teaching as they were able to develop a more student-centered perspective.

- Teachers felt satisfied and motivated by their work as they saw it as more worthwhile, more their own responsibility, and more the product of their efforts.

- Decision-Making - This is the responsibility to monitor their own programs, to make decisions regarding new program implementation, and to have input on the selection of new teachers and budgetary decisions.
  - Teachers were allowed to work collaboratively, control time schedules and student groupings, and develop curriculum and instruct students on a collaborative basis.
  - Teachers were able to control instructional decisions and monitor the progress of students.
  - Teachers were better able to make decisions regarding programmatic matters than departmentally organized classroom professionals.

- Impact - This is the ability to get things done, to participate in staff development, to have an effect and influence on educational programs, to be a decision-maker, and to have the opportunity to influence others, including colleagues and students.

- Teachers were able to develop their instructional program with colleagues and influence fellow professionals and their mutually shared group of students.
- Teachers were able to act with greater confidence on student matters, including disciplinary problems, because of the ability to identify and diagnose problems with colleagues, rather than react to individual students' personalities

• Status - This is the ability to have professional respect, to be productive and effective, to enjoy respect and admiration from professional colleagues, to possess expertise and knowledge in instructional techniques, and to be reliable and good at one's profession.

- Teachers were able to act collegially to counteract the undesirable effects of isolation, such as professional despair.
- Teachers were able to expand their roles without leaving the classroom by taking advantage of new leadership opportunities, etc.
- Teachers came to recognize the strengths of their colleagues; and, consequently, their respect for team members grew.

- Autonomy - This is the ability to control daily schedules, to teach as one chooses, to have freedom to make decisions on instruction, and to generate decisions about curriculum.
  - Teachers were able to control daily schedules through block scheduling.
  - Teachers used their own unique teaching style to complement the strengths of fellow team members.
  - Teachers were able to decide, within the adopted curriculum framework, the subject to be taught and when it would be offered.
  - Teachers were able to design their own integrated thematic curriculum units with fellow team members.

What may we conclude?

Given the seemingly clear preference shown by middle level teachers for the empowering nature of interdisciplinary teams, it is worth noting the parallels between this type of organization for work in schools and successful self-directed or self-managed teams used in business and industry. One such parallel is that self-directed work teams, much as interdisciplinary teams, incorporate small groups of workers who are

empowered to manage themselves and the work they perform on a daily basis (Wellins, Byham & Wilson, 1991). In addition, self-directed teams share with interdisciplinary teams the responsibility to carry out a well-defined function from start to finish. The importance of such an approach is that it allows self-directed team members and teachers to see the end results of their efforts. It is widely accepted that knowledge of results is an essential element of motivation for work. Furthermore, this motivational factor is most likely heightened by the high commitment teachers, as professionals, display in their work with students.

Combined with these parallels, we believe that high levels of education among workers have been manifested in what at least one researcher points to as a general call by employees for greater participation, flexibility and autonomy (Wellins, 1992). Therefore, teachers, possessing considerably greater levels of education than the average worker, would seem to us more covetous of autonomy, shared decision-making and flexibility in schools. In brief, these similarities add to our understanding regarding the reasons why teachers feel more empowered in interdisciplinary teams and thus experience greater satisfaction in their work. Finally, it appears to us that the

interdisciplinary team approach is not only more instructionally effective for early adolescent learners, but it is also a more enlightened, progressive and empowering type of work organization for middle level educators.

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